



Dear Editor:

The following activities can be used as part of a conversation class or in any general language class. Each takes no longer than 15 to 20 minutes. I like to use them in my classes because they're "minimalist." They don't require fancy equipment or a lot of photocopies, nor do they take a lot of time to prepare.

Lists of Words. Give students a list of words and have them work together in pairs and small groups to do various tasks with the list: 1) For a list of occupations, students could classify them into safe and dangerous jobs, 2) For a list of colors, students could classify them into hot/warm/cool/cold, or 3) For a set of unrelated words, students could determine what common feature they share. For example, *color*, *program*, and *theater* all have different spellings in British and American English. Or, students could determine what word doesn't belong. For the list *coffee*, *books*, *basketball*, *classroom*, and *sunbathing*, only *sunbathing* lacks double letters. For the list *weight*, *sight*, *bye*, *pie*, *height*, the vowel sound in *weight* is different.

For this type of activity, students can make similar lists of words for other groups to figure out. The answers may vary because students often see relationships different from the intended answers. They should discuss possible solutions.

Problem Solving. Give students problems to discuss in pairs or small groups: 1) Which of the following items can the world do without: birds, schools, flowers, socks, forks? 2) There is a bowl of water on the table. How many ways can you get the water out without touching the bowl? 3) Your best friend has borrowed your favorite shirt for a party. Several days later, you get the shirt back, but you discover it has a cigarette burn. What will you do?

One-minute Topics. Give students a list of topics and have them, individually or in pairs, choose one of them. Give

them several minutes to think about what they will say to the rest of the class or to their partner about their topic. Possible topics include: three difficult things about learning English, three reasons to get married (or not get married), three ways to show someone you love them.

I've found that once students become familiar with this type of quick activity, they can work together to make their own variations on these three I've suggested or entirely new "minimalist" activities.

Michael Onushko

BISHKEK, KYRGYZSTAN

Dear Editor:

I wonder if the following writing activity would be useful for readers of *English Teaching Forum*. It can help students avoid bland and repetitive sentence structure, such as when they begin every sentence with an article (The, A, An) or first person (I, We).

Students are given the topic for an essay, for example, *Summer Vacation*. With this topic, the first sentence of the essay must start with the letter S, the second sentence starts with the letter U, the third sentence with the letter M, until they have written a 14-sentence essay using each letter of the topic, ending with a sentence that begins with N.

When students are forced to use alternative sentence structure, they cannot help but come up with interesting sentences! Two other topics I have used are *My Favorite Holiday* and *A Very Boring Essay*. Teachers can think up their own topics. The point is to get students to think creatively about how to begin sentences.

Kelly Gleason

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

Dear Editor:

In Chinese universities, English is a required course. Teachers often find them-

selves with big classes, especially for listening. One class may hold 100 or even 200 students! Such large classes are also diverse in terms of students' ages, motivation, and English proficiency.

I have tried to solve the problems of large listening classes by using a wide variety of listening materials, materials of different difficulty levels, and different tasks with the same material. I'd like to offer some suggestions to readers of *English Teaching Forum* for how to use the same listening materials for different tasks in large classes.

Students at different levels of proficiency can perform the following, different tasks while listening to the same taped lecture segment. Beginning students can simply try to understand the general idea of the listening passage. They may also be able to identify a few subtopics. Intermediate students should be able to take notes and outline the general idea and most of the subtopics of the passage. Advanced students should be able to take detailed, logically organized notes of the entire passage. The students who take notes can use them for a comprehension check led by the teacher.

For a video segment, again beginning students can be asked to listen for the main idea. They can also listen for any new expressions they hear and remember. Intermediate students should be able to follow the conversation in the video and listen and write down new words or expressions they hear. Advanced students should be able to listen and comprehend without having to translate or take any notes.

In a large listening class, using various materials and assigning different listening tasks can keep students motivated and challenged. They will benefit from the course in varying degrees, but they must be allowed to decide for themselves what level of challenge to aim for.

Wu Yan

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